DECORATIVE CONTAINER

Field of the Invention

The present invention is directed to a decorative container, more particularly a decorative container including a hollow region where objects can be displayed.

Background of the Invention

Decorative containers are known in the prior art that allow sheets of material or objects to be stored within the walls of the container. For example, some beverage mugs provide space for a sheet of material, such as a photo, in the wall of the mug. Some of these decorative mugs may allow for insertion of liquid or fine particles within the space provided for decoration.

A transparent bowl is known that provides a hollow region between an inner and outer bowl that is purchased with decorative objects already present in the hollow region. However, it is not possible for the purchaser of this bowl of the prior art to access the hollow region to change the decorative objects.

Transparent storage systems for items such as fishing lures are also known, such as the compartmentalized container of U.S. Patent No. 3,378,134. The compartments can be rotated to bring them in line with access openings on the outer container wall. The access openings may be covered by a hinged access door that is readily visible on the container wall. The access door provides access to only one compartment at a time.

A decorative container providing a hollow region for displaying three-dimensional decorative objects is described in U.S. Patent Application Serial No. 09/586,153, filed June 2, 2000. This container provides dividers within the hollow region for separating the decorative objects in a number of internal cavities and a removable access opening for accessing the hollow region.

There is a need for additional arrangements for holding three-dimensional decorative objects in a decorative container or decorative container system. Containers with different configurations are needed where decorative objects in a hollow region of the container can be changed by the user.

Summary of the Invention

According to a first aspect of the invention, a decorative container for displaying items in internal cavities includes an inner container positioned within an outer container defining a hollow region therebetween, where the outer container is at least partially transparent. The decorative container also includes a removable member allowing access to the hollow region and a plurality of removable dividers extending radially from the inner container to the outer container in the hollow region. The dividers are spaced about the hollow region defining a plurality of hollow cavities within the hollow region.

According to a second aspect of the invention, a decorative lid for a jar defines a hollow lid cavity and includes a base portion shaped to be removably mounted in an opening of the jar where the base portion defines a lower boundary of the hollow lid cavity and defines a lid access opening that provides access to the hollow lid cavity. The decorative lid also includes a shell defining an upper boundary of the hollow lid cavity. The shell is connected to the base portion. The shell is at least partially transparent. The lid also includes a removable lid access member mounted in the lid access opening of the base portion.

According to a third aspect of the invention, a decorative container system for displaying items in internal cavities includes a decorative container including an upper opening and an inner container positioned within an outer container thereby defining a hollow region therebetween. The outer container is at least partially transparent. The decorative container system further includes a removable member allowing access to the hollow region. A decorative lid is also included in the decorative container system and is shaped to be removably mounted in the upper opening of the decorative container. The decorative lid defines a hollow lid cavity and includes a removable lid access member that provides access to the hollow lid cavity.

According to a fourth aspect of the invention, a decorative container for displaying items in internal cavities includes an inner container positioned within an outer container defining a hollow region therebetween where the outer container is at least partially transparent. The decorative container also includes access means for allowing access to the

hollow region and removable divider means for dividing the hollow region into a plurality of internal cavities.

Brief Description of the Drawings

The invention may be more completely understood by considering the detailed description of various embodiments of the invention which follows in connection with the accompanying drawings.

FIG. 1 is a side view of a decorative container and a decorative container lid of the present invention.

FIG. 2 is a perspective view of a decorative container and lid of FIG. 1, where dividers are shown underneath the outer container.

FIG. 3 is a cross-sectional view of the decorative container and lid of FIG. 1.

FIG. 4 is an exploded view of the decorative container and decorative container lid of FIG. 1.

FIG. 5 is a top view of the decorative container of FIG. 1, without the decorative lid, where the dividers are shown as visible through the outer container and the removable access member is visible at the bottom of the container.

FIG. 6 is a bottom view of the decorative container of FIG. 1 with the removable access member removed and the dividers removed.

FIG. 7 is a side view of a removable bottom access member of the present invention.

FIG. 8 is a top view of the removable bottom access member of the present invention.

FIG. 9 is a cross-sectional view of a bottom portion of a container base of the present invention.

FIG. 10 is a top perspective view of a decorative container of FIG. 1.

FIG. 11 is a side view of a divider used in the hollow region of the decorative container of FIG. 1.

FIG. 12 is a back view of a divider used in the hollow region of the decorative container of FIG. 1.

FIG. 13 is a perspective view of the decorative container and lid of FIG. 1 with the removable access member removed and a person placing decorative objects within the hollow region.

FIG. 14 is a cross-sectional view of an alternate embodiment of a decorative container where the removable access member is defined in an upper portion.

FIG. 15 is a top view of the decorative container of FIG. 14 including a removable access member removable from an upper portion of the decorative container.

While the invention is amenable to various modifications and alternative forms, specifics thereof have been shown by way of example in the drawings and will be described in detail. It should be understood, however, that the intention is not to limit the invention to the particular embodiments described. On the contrary, the intention is to cover all modifications, equivalents, and alternatives falling within the spirit and scope of the invention as defined by the appended claims.

Detailed Description of the Preferred Embodiments

The present invention is believed to be applicable to a variety of systems and arrangements for displaying decorative objects in a container that can be used to hold items. The invention has been found to be particularly advantageous where it is desired to display different types of three-dimensional objects in a format such that the arrangement of the decorative objects and the content of the decoration can be easily changed to suit different circumstances. The invention is also especially useful where it is desirable to display several different types of decorative objects in separate internal cavities of a decorative container. In addition, the invention is advantageous where it is desired to allow a user to determine the number and configuration of internal cavities in the decorative container by positioning removable dividers within the hollow region. The invention in one embodiment also provides the advantage of a decorative lid with a hollow lid region for displaying objects.

FIG. 1 illustrates a side view of one particular embodiment of a decorative container system 10 of the present invention, including a container 15 and a lid 20. In FIG. 1, only the outer surface 21 of the decorative container system 10 is illustrated for simplicity, although in the preferred embodiment of the decorative container system 10, the outer surface 21 will be

transparent. In FIG. 2, some internal features of the decorative container system are illustrated, as they would be visible through the transparent outer surface 21. As illustrated in FIGS. 2-3, the container 15 includes a hollow region 34 defined between an inner container 25 and an outer container 30 where decorative objects may be displayed. The lid 20 includes a hollow lid cavity 100 for displaying decorative objects. The decorative container may be used with or without the decorative lid, and the decorative lid may also be used independent of the decorative container, such as with other containers. In addition, the lid may not have a hollow lid cavity and not store decorative objects.

FIG. 3 shows a cross-sectional view of the decorative container system, including the decorative container 15 and the lid 20 of FIG. 1. The container 15 includes a container base portion made up of the inner container 25 and the outer container 30. The container 15 also includes a removable access member 40. A hollow region 34 is defined between the outer container 30 and the inner container 25. The hollow region may be used to display decorative objects including two- and three-dimensional objects such as seasonal decorative items, colorful candy, dried food items, photos, etc. The hollow region is sized to accommodate these types of decorative items. For example, the inner container and outer container may be separated by at least about 1 centimeter at their point of greatest separation. Alternatively, the inner container and outer container may be separated by at least about 2 centimeters or preferably at least about 2.5 centimeters, at their point of greatest separation. The distance between the inner container 25 and the outer container 30, or the depth of the hollow region 34, may be adjusted depending upon the types of decorative objects to be displayed within the hollow region. In addition, the depth of the hollow region 34 may be adjusted to facilitate removal and insertion of the decorative objects from the hollow region 34.

It may be desirable to divide the hollow region 34 into smaller cavities for segregating objects within the hollow region 34. Dividers 70 may be positioned within the hollow region 34 to divide the hollow region into a number of hollow cavities, as shown in FIGS. 2-4. Now referring to FIG. 4, grooves 76 are provided on an outer surface 35 of the inner container 25. Alternatively, grooves could be provided on an inner surface 36 of the container or on both containers. Each divider 70 extends from the inner container 25 to the

outer container 30 within the hollow region 34. Preferably, each divider 70 is removable through the access opening 48 so that a user can position a desired number of dividers within the hollow region 34 and divide up the hollow region into as many subregions as the user wants.

The decorative container 15 includes a removable access member that allows access to the hollow region 34. In one embodiment, the removable access member is a bottom plate 40 of the container 15. FIG. 4 is an exploded view of the components of the decorative container system 10, including a bottom plate 40 shown removed from the container base 32. The bottom plate 40 fits into a lower edge 44 of the outer container 15.

FIG. 5 shows a top view of the decorative container 15 where the dividers 70 in the grooves 76 are shown as visible through the outer container 30. The bottom access member 40 is in place, including a gripping bar 59, and is visible at the bottom of the container. FIG. 6 is a bottom view of the container base 32 without the bottom access member 40 in place. Referring to FIG. 6, a lower edge 44 of the outer container 30 and a lower edge 45 of the inner container 28 define an access opening 48 of the decorative container 15 which allows access to the hollow region 34. The access opening 48 may be used to insert, remove, and arrange decorative items within the hollow region 34.

The bottom plate 40 may interface with the lower edges 44 and 45 of the container base 32 (FIG. 9) in one of many ways. For example, the bottom plate 40 may be secured into place using a snap configuration, a screw on configuration, or a press-fit configuration.

In one embodiment a twist-lock type configuration is used to secure the bottom access member 40 into place in the access opening 48. The bottom member 40 of this embodiment is illustrated in a side view in FIG. 7 and in a top plan view in FIG. 8. The bottom member 40 includes four protrusions 49 on an inner ridge 50. The inner ridge 50 is configured to mate with the lower edge 45 of the inner container 25, also referred to as the inner lower edge 45, shown in FIG. 9. The four protrusions 49 are used to secure the bottom plate 40 in the access opening 48 of the container base 32. The four protrusions 49 correspond to a structure on the container base for securing the bottom plate 40.

The structure on the container base 32 that mates with the four protrusions 49 is best illustrated in FIG. 9, which is a cross sectional view of a portion of the container base 32

adjacent to the access opening 48. The container base 32 includes four ramps 51 spaced about the inner lower edge 45 in one embodiment. The ramps 51 include an inclined top surface 52 for interacting with the protrusions 49 as the bottom member 40 is rotated. The ramps 51 each include a notch portion 53 for receiving the protrusions 49 when the bottom member 40 is rotated into a closed position. The ramps 51 are positioned on the inner surface of the inner container wall 25, just below a bottom wall 54 of the container base 32.

Now referring to FIGS. 7-8, the bottom plate 40 includes an outer edge 55 that abuts the lower edge 44 of the outer container 30 (FIG. 4). The bottom plate 40 also includes an outer bottom surface 56 and a rounded edge 57. The outer bottom surface 56 will contact a supporting surface when the bottom plate is on the decorative container and the container is in use. The bottom plate 40 further includes divider grooves 58 that will line up with dividers within the hollow regions when the bottom plate 40 is in the closed position, in one embodiment. As shown in FIGS. 4-5, bottom plate 40 may include a gripping ridge 59 for facilitating handling by a user of the container for easy assembly and removal of the bottom plate 40.

The inner and outer container may be continuously joined together at an upper region 60, as shown in FIGS. 3-4. The outer container 30 includes a tapered portion 61 near the upper region 60 in the illustrated embodiment. It is also possible for this tapered portion to take on a different configuration, such as a square shoulder or other configurations. The container base 32 includes a neck 62 extending upwardly at the top of the container base 32. In one embodiment the neck 62 is a cylindrical sidewall extending upwardly from the inner container 25. The neck 62 defines an opening to an interior space 64 within the inner container 25, as shown in FIG. 10. Many different items may be stored within the interior space 64 of the inner container 25, such as household items, food items, baking supplies, etc.

In one alternative embodiment, the removable access member may be positioned at a location other than at the bottom plate. For example, the removable access member may be a removable rim or rim portion from the top portion of the decorative container 15. Preferably, the removable access member, wherever it is provided, is configured so that it is not readily visible to an observer.

FIG. 14 is a cross-sectional view of an alternate embodiment of a decorative container 200 where the removable access member 210 is defined in an upper portion 215 of the container. The access member in this embodiment is an annular shaped plate that fits into place between the inner container 220 and the outer container 225. The container 200 includes a square shoulder 230 in contrast to the rounded shoulder area of the decorative container embodiment shown in FIG. 3. Many features of the decorative container 200 are the same as the decorative container of FIG. 3. A cylindrical neck 231 extends above the hollow region access opening. At a bottom portion of the decorative container, a bottom wall 232 is present, without a bottom access opening.

The container 200 also includes grooves 233 on the inner container 220 for receiving dividers. Preferably the dividers (not shown) may be removed or inserted through the access opening covered by the removable access member 210. In a preferred embodiment, the width of the grooves may increase slightly toward the top of the container, to facilitate the molding process. This preference is in contrast to the illustrated embodiment where the grooves widen slightly toward the bottom of the container. Alternatively, the grooves may have a uniform width along the height of the decorative container. A side action molding process may be used to accomplish uniform groove width.

FIG. 15 is a top view of container 200 showing the removable access member 210. The grooves 233 are not shown in the top view of FIG. 15 for simplicity. The removable access member 210 includes an outer edge 235 that mates with the upper edge of the outer container 225 and an inner edge 240 that mates with the upper edge of the inner container 220. Preferably the access member 210 engages the top rims of the container with a press-fit configuration. Preferably a user can easily remove and replace the access member 210 by hand.

In a further alternative embodiment, the access member could be an annular shaped plate corresponding to the rounded shoulder of FIG. 1. This access member could be removed in its entirety to provide access to the hollow region. Alternatively the rounded shoulder access member could rotate with respect to the inner and outer container and may define a smaller opening that provides access to the hollow region. This smaller opening

may be positioned above each hollow cavity as the rounded shoulder access member is rotated.

FIG. 11 shows a side view of a divider 70 while FIG. 12 shows a back view of a divider 70. Each divider includes an innermost edge 74 that interacts with the inner container 25. The divider 70 includes a bottom edge 78 and an outermost curved edge 80. The outermost curved edge 80 is curved to match the tapered portion 61 at the top of the outer container near the upper region 60. The outermost curved edge 80 is in contact with the inner surface 36 of the outer container 30 when the divider 70 is in position within the hollow region 34. Now referring to FIG. 4, the innermost edge 74 is preferably received by a groove 76 on the exterior surface 35 of the inner container 25. Each groove 76 is sized for receiving the divider 70.

In a preferred embodiment, the decorative container 15 includes eight removable dividers. The number of dividers may be varied. For example, six dividers may be used. Alternatively, four dividers may be used. Other numbers of dividers may also be used. Preferably, the dividers are equally spaced throughout the hollow region 34.

Each divider 70 includes a thicker portion 84. As shown in FIGS. 3 and 10, the grooves 76 that receive the dividers 70 are slightly wider at a bottom portion and become narrower at a top portion of the groove 76 in one embodiment. Where the container base 32 is formed using injection molding processes, it is desirable for the divider grooves 76 to include a wider bottom portion to facilitate removal of the molded container base from the mold. A thicker portion 84 of the dividers is provided, adjacent to the bottom edge 78 and adjacent to the innermost edge 74, to occupy the space in the divider grooves so that the dividers 70 are not able to move freely side-to-side within the grooves. The thicker portion 84 of the dividers extends along the length of the divider for about 2 inches or about 5 centimeters in the illustrated embodiment. The thicker portion of the divider is about 5 millimeters, or about .21 inches in thickness. The remainder of the divider has a wall thickness of about .09 inch, or about 2 millimeters. In a preferred embodiment, the width of the dividers is about .871 inches, or about 2.2 centimeters. The preferred length of the dividers is about 7.6 inches, or about 19 centimeters.

FIGS. 1-4 also illustrate the decorative lid of the present invention. The lid 20 includes a hollow lid region 100 where decorative objects may be displayed. The lid 20 includes a base portion 110 and a top shell portion 115 that are joined together at an outer edge 118 of the base portion 110. The base portion 110 defines a lid access opening 120 for providing access to the hollow lid region 100.

The lid 20 may also include a removable lid member 125 for removably fitting into the lid access opening 120. The removable lid member 125 is shaped to fit into place in the lid access opening 120 and may include raised portions 130 to allow for easier gripping by a user. The removable lid member 125 may fit into the lid access opening 120 using a variety of techniques known in the art, such as a screw on configuration, a snap on configuration, or preferably, a press-fit configuration.

Preferably, the removable lid member 125 is made of a material that is somewhat more flexible than the material that forms the lid base portion 110. The lid access opening 120 may have an edge surface that is angled to interact with a corresponding angled surface on the outer edge of the removable lid member. The angled surfaces and the relative flexibility of the removable lid member, along with the dimensions of the removable lid member 125 and base 110, facilitate a press-fit interaction between the removable lid member 125 and the lid base portion 110. It is preferable that the lid access member can be removed from the lid access opening by hand without any special tools.

The base portion 110 of the lid 20 is shaped to fit into the upper opening of the decorative container 15 defined by the neck 62. The base portion 110 may include a rim 134 that fits inside the neck 62 of the inner container 25 of the decorative container 15.

The lid 20 is also intended to display the contents of the hollow lid region 100. Accordingly, it is preferred that at least a portion of the lid 20 is at least partially transparent. For example, it is preferred that at least the shell 115 of the lid 20 is at least partially transparent. More preferably, all components of the lid are at least partially transparent.

The shell 115 of the lid 20 may be shaped in many different configurations. In the illustrated embodiment, the shell is dome shaped, but many other shapes are possible. The shell 115 may attach to the base portion 110 of the lid using many different configurations. In a preferred embodiment, an outer edge 118 of the base 110 is sized to tightly fit within the

lower edge 119 of the shell 115. The lower edge 119 of the shell portion may have an angled surface that facilitates this connection. Alternatively, adhesives, thermal or sonic welding or other techniques may be used to join the shell 115 and the base 110 of the lid 20.

The decorative container system 10 of the present invention may be used to store items such as flour, cookies, or cooking ingredients, among other household items, in the interior space 64. The hollow region 34 is intended to serve a decorative function by providing a location to display decorative items such as dried pasta, colorful candies, beads, or photos, for example.

It may be desirable to combine two and three dimensional objects when filling the hollow region of the decorative container. For example, where some of the dividers in the preferred embodiment having eight dividers are removed, a photograph could be placed within a wider hollow cavity. Decorative objects that compliment the photo could be placed in the other hollow cavities. It may be desirable to insert tissue paper or other filler material between the back of the photograph and the inner container, so that the photograph is pressed against the outer container. Many different arrangements of decorative objects may be accomplished because of the flexibility provided by the removable dividers in one embodiment of the invention.

In order to serve the decorative purpose, it is preferred that the outer container 30 is at least partially transparent. By "at least partially transparent" it is meant that an ordinary observer can discern the objects within the hollow region 34. More preferably, all components of the decorative container system are at least partially transparent. In a preferred embodiment, some or all of the components are clear.

It is also possible that some portions of the decorative container system are transparent, while others are opaque. For example, the inner container 25 may be opaque, while the outer container, dividers, and other components may be transparent. In the alternative, the inner container, dividers and bottom plate may be opaque, while only the outer container is transparent.

The decorative container 15 may be provided in many different sizes, depending on the types of decorative items to be displayed and the types of objects to be stored within the container. In one preferred embodiment, the container is cylindrically shaped and the upper

rim of the container is circular. Preferably, the upper rim of the container has a diameter of about 3 to 8 inches, or about 8 to 20 centimeters, preferably about 5 inches, or about 13 centimeters. In the preferred embodiment, the outer diameter of the container is about 5 to 10 inches, or about 13 to 25 centimeters and is preferably about 7 inches, or about 18 centimeters. The height of the container in the preferred embodiment may be about 4 to 12 inches, or about 10 to 30 centimeters, preferably about 8 inches, or about 21 centimeters. In the preferred embodiment, the distance between the inner container and the outer container may be about .5 inch to 2 inches, or about 1.25 to 5 centimeters, preferably about 1 inch or about 2.5 centimeters.

The preferred embodiment is cylindrically shaped, which allows for the dividers to be easily removed through the access opening. Other shapes are also possible according to the present invention, such as bowl shapes or tray shapes. The walls of the decorative container system are preferably about 0.09 inches, or about 2.3 millimeters thick.

The decorative container system may be constructed of many different materials that have adequate rigidity for storing items in the open area and for storing decorative objects in the internal cavities. Other desirable characteristics of the decorative container are transparency, ease of manufacture, low cost, durability, washability, and visual attractiveness. Preferably, the components of the decorative container are made of the same material and are molded using well known techniques. Preferred materials for the decorative container include polystyrene and other plastic materials. In a preferred embodiment, the components of the decorative container system are all made of polystyrene except for the removable lid access member which is made of polypropylene.

Many different construction techniques may be used to produce the decorative container system of the present invention. Preferably, injection molding is used to produce the components of the decorative container. In one embodiment, each of the components that is separately pictured in the exploded view FIG. 4 is produced as a separate component using injection molding. The container base 32 is molded as one piece, including the inner and outer containers and the neck. The injection molding process may result in small lines on the surface of the components called "witness lines" where two mold pieces meet or where there is a change in the radius of curvature of a surface. In FIG. 1, witness lines 140 are shown on

the shell portion 115 of the lid and on the outer container wall where there is a change in the radius of curvature. The witness lines will be nearly invisible when the proper molding techniques, known in the art, are employed. Where components of the decorative container system may be permanently attached together, such as the attachment between the shell and the base portion of the lid, adhesive or other well known joinery techniques may be used.

Alternatively, the inner container and the outer container may be separate pieces. The inner container may be removable from the outer container by the user.

The decorative container system of the present invention allows for custom design of a decorative container so that the decorations may be suited for a certain room's décor, the theme of a certain season or for a personal gift with favorite objects of the gift receiver. The removable access member provided for the lid and for the container allow for the contents to be easily changed.

In order to decorate the decorative container system of the present invention, the container 15 is turned upside down and the removable access plate 40 is removed, which provides access to the hollow region 34, as shown in FIG. 13. It may be desirable to rest the upper neck 62 on a working surface while decorating the container. The dividers 70 may be positioned within the grooves 76 as desired. Then, decorative objects 150 are dropped into position in the various internal cavities. A wand or other positioning member may be used to assist with placing the decorative objects within the cavities. An example of a wand that may be used with the decorative container of the present invention is described in U.S. Patent Application Serial No. 09/586,153, which is hereby incorporated herein by reference in its entirety, in the text related to FIGS. 7-9. When the decorative objects have been arranged as desired, the removable access member is put back in place in the access opening. Once the removable access member is in place, the decorative objects are securely contained within the internal cavities and the container 15 may be turned so that the opening to the interior space is facing upward.

The lid 20 of the system 10 may be decorated by first removing the removable lid member 125. Decorative objects may then be placed within the hollow lid region 100. Then the removable lid member 125 is pressed into place in the lid access opening 120. The lid 20 may be placed in position on top of the container 15.

When a change of decorative items within the internal cavities is desired, the removable access member may be removed and the objects may be emptied from the internal cavities. Likewise, the removable lid member 125 may be removed from the lid access opening 120 and the objects may be emptied from within the hollow lid region 100.

An open area 160 is present at the bottom of the container base 32 as shown in FIG. 13. In the preferred embodiment, the access member 40 will occupy most of the open area 160, as shown in the cross-sectional view of FIG. 13. However, in an alternative embodiment, the open area 160 and access member 40 would be configured to allow objects to be placed within the open area.

The various embodiments described above are provided by way of illustration only and should not be construed to limit the invention. Those skilled in the art will readily recognize various modifications and changes which may be made to the present invention without strictly following the preferred embodiments and applications illustrated and described herein, and without departing from the true spirit and scope of the present invention which is set forth in the following claims.